

THE AIR WAR IN ITALY

After our planes arrived we had a major task to check and inspect all the airborne armament. All guns had to be removed and cleaned, and each turret and all bomb racks had to be thoroughly checked. This work took several days. The weather continued to be bitter cold and damp - at night we shivered, even with four wool blankets. Except for the brief periods when we could huddle around our stoves in the evening, we were always cold. That winter of '44 was the worst time I have known. Pulling guard duty at night was especially bad, for we had only regular Army issue clothing - we had none of the special Air Force cold weather jackets, pants, boots and helmets which had been so welcome at Fairmont A.F.B.

When our air crews arrived we learned of the amazing exploit of one of our planes, No. 636. Over ~~the Caribbean Sea - Windward Islands~~ ^{St. Lucia} ~~mid ocean, between South America and Africa,~~ she lost first one, then two and, finally, three of her engines. Only the number three engine was still functioning. To lighten the load, the pilot, Lt. Winski, ordered his crew to throw overboard everything that could be tossed out the open hatches. First went all the machine guns and ammunition which could be easily removed, then bomb shackles and hoists went out, along with other loose equipment. Finally all the crew members' personal luggage was tossed out. It was a desperate measure, but it saved the ship. Winski managed to land her at an emergency field on ~~Ascension~~ ^{St. Lucia} Island on one engine, a feat which no one believed a B-24 could accomplish. When 636 arrived at Gioia we had to almost completely re-fit her. Winski was immediately promoted to Captain by our Group Commander for his remarkable achievement. The plane was later named, "Three Feathers" and a pretty, naked gal, holding three appropriately positioned feathers, was painted on her nose.

On the 22nd we saw our first fatal accident at the field, though it was not one of our planes. A C-47 cargo plane was landing with a load of equipment when, for some reason, it ground-looped, flipped over and burned. None of the crew was able to get out. The field at Gioia, as noted earlier, had been built as a fighter strip by the Italians. It was never intended for use by heavy bombers. We were assigned there only temporarily, until the engineers could complete our permanent base near Foggia. The runway had been lengthened for use by our bombers and steel matting had been put over the unpaved runway to better distribute the weight of the B-24's.

While working on our planes on the line, some of us got to know a few of the R.A.F. ground crews. I became good friends with the crew of a Hurricane which was parked fairly close to our squadron. The mechanic was from Birmingham and the armorer was from Wellington, New Zealand. When I had a little spare time I sometimes helped clean the machine guns in the Hurricane - she carried an incredible six Cal. .303 guns in each wing. The plane's mechanic was fascinated by a pair of "water pump" pliers I had, which he had never seen before, so I gave the tool to him as a gift and drew another from supply.

On the 25th an old "D" model B-24, with 59 missions to her credit, was transferred to our squadron from another Group. She was named "Tangerine" and we spent about three days trying to get her back into

"fighting trim". A week or so later she was transferred back out of the Squadron! We also had to complete a variety of modifications to our planes which had been directed since we left Fairmont.

On the 28th I came down with a fever and chills - another bout with some sort of Army "bug". I was very sick the following day and that night we received our first orders to load live bombs. I was feeling too ill to help out and I felt terrible about it.

Our Group's first combat mission was flown on 30 January. We were, of course, in the 15th Air Force and were assigned to the 49th Wing, along with two other B-24 Groups, the 461st and the 484th. This first mission was the usual "Milk Run" (an easy mission) which was assigned to inexperienced new Bomb Groups. There was no flak and no fighter opposition, but even so we missed the target, a radar station in Albania.

I felt very bad for over a week and again had some pain in my ear, but I remained on duty after the first couple days. We loaded 500 pound demolition (demo) bombs again the night of 1 February for a mission against another Albanian radar station on the second. That day there WAS flak and a number of planes came back with damage. One plane of the 724th Squadron crash-landed with a blown tire and one engine out because of flak. This was our first real introduction to the realities of war.

I have previously described (pages ^{32 33}~~30,31~~) B-24 bomb racks and the method of mounting bombs, so it might be useful at this point to describe the mechanics of loading bombs and to identify the types of bombs we used. We had a curious organizational structure with respect to handling of bombs and ammunition. Each Bomb Squadron had assigned to it three or four Ordnance men. These soldiers were actually in the Army Ordnance Corps, assigned to the Air Force. On their uniforms they wore the Ordnance Corps insignia (irreverently referred to as the "Flaming Piss-pot"), rather than the Air Force insignia. (Likewise, we also had two men assigned to each squadron from the Army Chemical Corps, to serve as gas-protection specialists.) Ordnance was responsible for the transportation of bombs and ammunition from ports like Naples and Bari, where it arrived via cargo vessels, to bomb dumps located near each bomber base. When orders were received for certain bombs to be loaded, the Ordnance people, who operated the bomb dumps, would load the appropriate bombs on special bomb trailers and haul them to the airfield where they unloaded the required number beside each aircraft. At that point we armorers took over and loaded the bombs into the planes. After loading, the Ordnance people would return to mount the steel fins on the larger demolition bombs and to install the fuzes in each bomb. The fins had to be installed after loading to prevent damage from handling. Ordnance was also responsible for installing the arming wires on the fuzes, but we often helped with that job.

Most of the larger general purpose demolition bombs had a fuze installed in both the nose and the tail, where there were threaded recesses to receive them. Smaller incendiary and fragmentation bombs usually carried only one fuze. The small 25 pound anti-personnel frag-

mentation bombs, which were mounted in clusters of six, were shipped in wood boxes, with the fuzes already installed. We hated to load fragmentation bombs because they were so awkward and hard to handle, but we loved the cases they came in as we used the wood to construct floors for our tents.

The fuze (yes, it is properly spelled with a "z"!) contained a very sensitive explosive train which actually detonated the T.N.T. in the bomb. Each fuze was normally in a "safe" condition. It had a small propeller at the end which was locked into position with a removable safety pin much like a cotter pin. In flight, on the way to the target, the Bombardier had to remove this pin from each bomb fuze and bring them back so that the armorer could verify that all arming pins had been removed. After the bomb was dropped, air flow would rotate the propellers rapidly and after a set number of revolutions the fuze would be "armed" and ready to explode the bomb on contact. Some fuzes could be adjusted for a predetermined time delay so that, for example, a bomb would not explode when it hit a factory roof, but a brief time later after it was inside the building. Sometimes we used fuzes with very long time delays, of perhaps several hours. These we called "booby-trap" fuzes as they caused a buried bomb to explode under the earth long after it landed. In addition, these fuzes had another nasty feature. Two ball-bearings rode in tapered tracks on opposite sides of the fuze. As it was screwed into the bomb these balls recessed into the deep part of the track, causing no interference. But when anyone tried to disarm the bomb by removing the fuze, the balls would jam against the threads, penetrate the thin wall of the fuze and instantly detonate the bomb. Even we could not remove these things and when a plane had to abort a mission and return with unused bombs they were usually dropped "safe" into the Adriatic Sea. It was just too dangerous to try to unload them on the ground for re-use, with those fuzes installed.

Since, after the Bombardier had removed the arming pins in flight, air flowing through the bomb bay might cause the fuze propellers to rotate and arm the bombs inside the plane, a second safety device, called an arming wire, was used. This was a long brass wire with a ring in the center. The two ends of the wire were inserted through the two fuze propellers to prevent their rotation and the center ring was attached to a special spring-loaded snap on the bomb shackle. When the bomb was released through the bombsight this retainer snap would be locked closed thus captivating the arming wire, which pulled out of the fuzes as the bomb dropped and remained attached to the shackle. Normally, when bombs were "salvoed" mechanically, the retainer snap was NOT locked and the arming wire ring would pull out of the shackle and fall with the bomb, thus preventing the fuzes from arming during free fall. In practice, because there were many missions, especially later in '44 when it was desired to drop armed bombs in "salvo", we often hooked the ring of the arming wire over one of the shackle arms so that there was no way any bomb could fall in a "safe" condition.

During our first several weeks of combat missions we loaded bombs in the standard approved manner. Two hand-operated winches, which had a long steel cable with a hook on the end wound around the drum, were mounted on the inside of the bomb rack to be loaded. The bomb, say a

500 pounder, was rolled under the bomb bay by hand and positioned under the rack. A heavy-duty double web sling, with attach points at each end was positioned under the bomb. Next, the winch cables were rigged through pulleys and the hooks were connected to the bomb sling. Then two men, one on each winch, would slowly crank the bomb to the proper place on the rack, starting at the top, while a third man guided the bomb up and finally connected the shackle into the large snaps on the rack. When the first rack was loaded the winches had to be removed and re-positioned on the next rack. A B-24 could carry a total of twelve 500 pound bombs and it would take three men at least 75 to 90 minutes to load one plane. Crews often had to load four planes in a night, so the work went on until the wee hours of the morning. Later on we came up with a much easier loading method, which I will describe later. It was contrary to all standing tech orders but it was so much simpler that one man, if necessary, could load a plane all by himself, in less time than three men using the approved loading method.

Smaller bombs, such as the 100 pound incendiaries and demo bombs and the fragmentation bomb clusters (frags) were loaded by hand by two men without the winches. These smaller bombs were loaded five to a rack - a total of twenty per plane. Later on, by using some special cables we devised, we were able to double our loads of incendiary and fragmentation bombs. The 250 and 300 pound demolition bombs were loaded at the same positions as the 500 pounders, i.e. twelve per plane. While we winched the upper one up, we often tried to speed the work by manually lifting the two lower 250 pound bombs into position. In retrospect, this was a stupid thing to do, as someone could have been badly injured if one of those bombs had dropped. As it was, three of us developed hernias and I suffered with mine until 1969, when I finally submitted to surgery. The 1000 pound bombs were loaded two to a bay - a total of eight per plane and for 2000 pound bombs we had to install special, auxiliary racks in each bomb bay, each of which held only one bomb, for a maximum load of four bombs.

All of the above were maximum loads. For long missions deep into Germany our planes often carried smaller loads, such as ten 500 pounders, six 1000 pounders and three 2000 pounders. By far the bomb we most frequently used was the 500 pound G.P. demolition bomb. The following is a list of all the bombs I can recall that we used:

- 25 # anti-personnel fragmentation - six per cluster - 40 clusters
- 100 # fragmentation (used against parked A.C.) - 40 per load
- 100 # G.P. demolition - up to 40 per load
- 100 # incendiary - up to 40 per load
- 250 # G.P. demolition - 12 per load
- 300 # G.P. demolition - 12 per load
- 500 # G.P. demolition - 12 per load
- 1000 # G.P. demolition - 8 per load
- 1000 # Armor-piercing demolition (used against sub pens) - 8 per load
- 2000 # G.P. demolition - 4 per load

When A.F. Headquarters called the Bomb Groups to give the orders for the next day's bomb load, they used code words for each bomb. I can recall only that the frag clusters were "Lightnings", 500 pounders

were "Liberators" and 2000 pounders were "Thunderbolts". All other bombs were also given aircraft names as code words.

Overall during our service in the 15th Air Force, the 451st Bomb Group flew 245 combat missions, the first on 30 January 1944 and the last on 26 April 1945. We bombed targets in Italy, France, Albania, Germany, Austria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Rumania and Bulgaria. Most of our missions were against strategic targets, such as aircraft factories, submarine pens, ball-bearing factories, oil refineries, airdromes and marshalling yards. We also bombed lesser targets such as bridges, radar stations, highways and front line targets in support of troop operations. It would be tedious to go over these one-by-one in this history, thus it is my intent to describe what I regard as the most significant of our operations and those events which were of direct personal interest. As an attachment to this record I have included a copy of our Group's complete mission history, as compiled from official Air Force records by our Bomb Group Association.

We were grounded for the period 4 - 7 February because of extremely poor weather conditions. Generally, it was cold, rainy and windy and on the 6th we had several inches of wet snow on the ground. Our first real blooding in combat occurred on 8 February when we bombed a steel mill and marshalling yards at Piombino, Italy. During take-off one of our squadron planes, "Old Tub", # 151, after appearing to lift off normally, and with her wheels already retracting, began to lose altitude, as though from a loss of power. She crashed with full bomb load about five miles beyond the runway. Of the ten crew members aboard, only three survived, one very seriously injured. One of the gunners was found walking around in total shock about a mile from the crash site. Most of us who were at the runway got into the nearest trucks, weapons carriers and jeeps to drive to the crash to offer whatever help we could. There was little to do - the wreckage was a roaring inferno, as the entire load of fuel and two bombs exploded. After the heat subsided the medics came in to recover whatever remained of the bodies of the crew. The rest of us worked around the wreckage to pick up any re-usable items of equipment or personal items we could find. I still recall picking up someone's fleece-lined flying boot, which seemed strangely heavy, and discovering to my horror that it still contained a human foot.

Yet there was more to come that day. The Group was subjected to heavy flak at the target and many planes were damaged. As we stood near the runway watching the planes return, we saw a red flare fired from Capt. Winski's plane - a signal that there were wounded aboard. His plane was given landing priority and as he swung into his final approach we could see that the entire upper front of the plane, including the windshield and upper turret dome, was red, as though covered with hydraulic fluid. Instinctively, we realized that there was no hydraulic system in that area and before the wheels touched the runway I am sure most of us realized that we were looking at blood, not hydraulic fluid.

Winski's nose gunner had taken a piece of flak directly in the head and had been entirely decapitated. We were to work all night under floodlights repairing the damage and cleaning up the turret. It was

the most gruesome task of my life. After the medics removed the gunner's body we had to replace the damaged turret dome and clean up the mess, as best we could. Cleaning the upper part of the fuselage was easy, compared with cleaning the turret itself. There were bits and pieces of blasted bone and flesh in every recess and crevice. We were provided with some sort of disinfectant to help with the cleaning but the smell of that, combined with the odor of the blood and flesh under the warm lights was sickening. Two men vomited during the long night and I came very close to doing so. For days afterwards, the new gunner who inherited that turret complained of the lingering odor.

On 9 February we received a new plane, # 429, with only 85 hours on her, to replace "Old Tub". The following night we had our first experience with loading "Lightnings", the anti-personnel fragmentation bombs which were mounted six to a cluster. Each bomb came with fuze and fins already mounted and the cluster weighed over 150 pounds. We loaded these by hand, with a man on each end to lift. They were awful things to handle because there was no good handhold and sharp pieces of metal stuck out everywhere. Cut fingers and ripped clothing usually went with loading them, and even our gloves, when we finally got some, were usually short-lived. The frags were for troop support missions to the Anzio beachhead, which were aborted because of bad weather.

On the afternoon of the 14th a truck ran into the nose guns on # 111, "Old Taylor", and bent them badly. Two of us spent all night replacing those guns. They were so badly bent that we had to saw off the barrels in order to remove the guns from the turret. It was bitter cold on the line that night and we wished we had the warm fleece-lined clothing that we had at Fairmont A.F.B.

On the 18th we had more snow and the mud around the field and tent areas seemed almost bottomless. Our planes were grounded for several days because of the weather. During this period I was still receiving Christmas packages from home - one with cookies in it was so badly crushed that only crumbs remained. On the 21st I had a pass and hitchhiked into Bari where I went to a movie in a British theater and also spent some time at a British service club, which, as I recall, was called the Campbell Club. It was a strange fact that while American soldiers were always welcome at British facilities in Italy, the American Red Cross did not allow British or Colonial troops to use their facilities. This sort of blatant discrimination began to sour me on the Red Cross and the feeling increased over the months and remains with me to this day.

Early on the morning of the 23rd a stove exploded in our Group H.Q. building and burned the wood structure to the ground - it was a spectacular blaze. On the following day our Squadron had finally managed to set up a make-shift shower, with semi-warm water which flowed by gravity from a couple 55 gallon drums mounted on a wood platform. It wasn't much, and we had to wait in a long line, but I managed to get my first shower since 3 December and it really felt great!

After seven relatively easy missions to targets in Albania and Italy, we flew our first mission to Germany on 22 February - an aircraft factory near Regensburg. An attack on another ME-109 factory near Steyr, Austria followed the next day. Then on 25 February we flew a memorable mission. Our target was the same ME-109 aircraft factory at Regensburg which we had bombed, not too well, on the 22nd. Our Group led the attack with 40 aircraft. They flew to the target without fighter escort, since we then had no fighters with the necessary range. Enroute they were attacked almost continuously by some 200 Luftwaffe ME-109's and there was intense anti-aircraft fire from batteries near the target. During the aerial battle our gunners shot down 16 German fighters but we lost six B-24's. Our bombs were accurately placed on the target, in spite of the opposition, with severe damage to the facility. Because many of the planes were damaged or had injured crewmen and because most were low on fuel when they returned, almost all of our planes landed at fields near Foggia. Only three returned to Gioia that evening. Our Squadron lost one plane, Lt. Coleman's "Hard To Get", # 738. This raid was part of what came to be known as the "Big Week" in the air offensive against Germany. Though we did not know it at the time, this was to be our last mission from that airfield. But it was also one of our finest - for this Regensburg mission our Group received its first Presidential Unit Citation, which entitled all personnel to wear the Distinguished Unit Citation, a gold rimmed badge with blue field, on the right breast of our uniforms. Before the war was over we were to receive two additional such citations - we were the only Heavy Bombardment Group to be awarded three Distinguished Unit Citations during the entire war!

It had been obvious for some time that our heavy bombers could not continue to operate from the field at Gioia del Colle. Their weight had forced the steel matting into the mud and landings had become hazardous. When our loaded B-24's took off they threw out "rooster tails" of mud and water, much like a racing hydroplane. Our planes returned to the field from Foggia on the 28th but thereafter the runway was closed to all but the R.A.F. Hurricanes which were still flying troop support missions to the front lines. The problem was that our new field was still under construction and the Air Force could not simply ground a Bomb Group for a couple months.

It was decided that our Group should be broken up temporarily, with two squadrons, ours and the 724th, going to a field in southern Italy, at San Pancrazio, with the other two squadrons to operate from another field near Manduria. On the second of March our squadron started moving men and planes to the field at San Pancrazio. I took my last pass to Bari the following day and spent my time wandering around the city with three Canadian soldiers from the Eighth Army.

On 5 March our Armament Section was told we would move the following day and we spent the rest of that day packing. The next day we took two of our five tents down, and dismantled our stoves, but the move did not come off. We had to double-up sleeping that night. On the 7th we took our remaining three tents down and three tent-groups of the fellows left that day, some by truck and others on planes. Those of us who remained had to sleep in the open on the ground with only a shelter-half to cover us, as our blankets had been packed and shipped ahead. It was a bitter cold and miserable night.

On the morning of the 8th our fourth tent-group left by plane. My group was the last to leave - we had lunch at the 60th Service Squadron then left via truck. The trip of about three and one-half hours took us through Taranto on very muddy roads and we finally arrived at our new field at San Pancrazio about suppertime in a pouring rain. The other fellows had already put our tent up so we just had to unload and move in. The ground was very muddy and since there was not time to re-assemble our bunk beds, which we had made from scrap wood at Gioia, we scavenged wood and roof tiles from a nearby bombed-out building and put it on the ground to sleep on. Though the tiles kept us out of the mud, they didn't make a very comfortable bed! We even had to load bombs on a couple planes that night in the rain. During the next couple days we made up our improvised bunk beds and got our stove set up.

When we had first started operations at Gioia our armament assignments were somewhat chaotic - we just all pitched in and did whatever work had to be done, regardless of which plane was involved. By mid-February, however, we got a bit better organized. Our Section was divided into three flights, each responsible for four or five planes. Each armorer was assigned to one specific plane but the flight worked together on loading operations. My plane was # 078, "Big Mogul", with Lt. Miller's flight crew. They were a fine crew and with our Crew Chief, T/SGT. Clayton, we were like a small family. Normally the gunners were responsible for cleaning and oiling their guns after every mission, while the armorer did all the maintenance and repair work.

Most of our bomb-loading was done during the night, for several reasons. The decision on what type and how many bombs to load came from 15th Air Force Headquarters and they seldom transmitted that decision before evening, after the day's mission had been evaluated. Once we got the word we had to wait sometimes two, three or more hours for the Ordnance guys to drop the bombs off at the planes. Only then could the armorers begin their work. Usually the fastest response was when we had orders for 500 pound G.P. demolition bombs, as they were the easiest to handle and load.

While at San Pancrazio we developed a new method for loading bombs to speed up our work and reduce labor. Instead of using two winches and a bomb sling, we dispensed with the sling and one winch. We had found that by simply making one turn of the winch cable around the bomb case and attaching the cable hook back onto the cable underneath the shackle we could easily winch the bombs into position by simply letting them slide up along the bomb rack. Thus, with one man cranking the winch and one guiding the bomb, two men, rather than three, could load a plane and could do it much more quickly than by using the standard two-winch method. We felt the method was safe, since the cables were designed for use with 2000 pound bombs, which meant they had a tensile strength well in excess of 1000 pounds each. In a pinch, one man could load a plane by himself, provided he was very careful to get the bomb well balanced on the single cable. I often loaded my plane alone, with 100, 250 and even 500 pound bombs.

We also developed a super-quick method of unloading planes when the bomb load had to be changed. Instead of setting up the winch and cranking each bomb down, we simply released the bombs one at a time by

mechanically moving the shackle releases and letting them drop to the revetment! Of course, the fins and fuzes were removed first and we only used this method on steel-cased demolition bombs. The frags and incendiaries were always lowered by hand, never dropped. This seemed perfectly safe to us since the ground was relatively soft and was covered with the flexible steel matting. In addition, we knew that T.N.T. was quite insensitive to that sort of mechanical shock. Later that year we learned to our dismay that this was NOT true of a newer type of bomb, as I will describe later.

We also developed another innovative bomb-loading technique at San Pancrazio. As noted earlier, a B-24 had a total of 20 bomb racks, which meant that, for example, only 20 100 pound demo bombs could be carried. This was a total load of only 2000 pounds, even though the plane could actually carry 8000 pounds in heavier 1000 or 2000 pound bombs. This represented a considerable waste of capacity which the Air Force should have recognized and done something about long before B-24's went into combat. I do not know who came up with the idea, or even whether it was developed in our Squadron or in our 60th Service Squadron. It was the sort of simple, but brilliant, idea which makes one wonder why he didn't think of it first. The concept was to hang a second small bomb (incendiary, frag cluster or 100 pound demo) outboard of the one attached to the bomb rack using a short length of steel cable hooked around the other bomb. The 60th Service Squadron fabricated the short cables with a loop swaged on each end. The cable was wrapped around the outboard bomb and the loops were slipped over the attachment lugs on the inboard bomb and held in position by the shackle. It worked beautifully - when a bomb rack was triggered, both bombs dropped, the cable simply fell off and the two bombs went on their way. This method doubled the capacity of the B-24 for carrying smaller demolition, fragmentation and incendiary bombs. It more than doubled the work load for the armorers, however, because it was a lot more difficult to load these doubles, especially when they were frag clusters. There was one benefit for us, however - double clusters of frags meant twice as many wood shipping crates which we could use for tent floors and makeshift chairs and bunks.

To give some idea of how our loading schedules went and the problems we had with delays and indecision, I will detail our work for a two-week period in mid-March '44, as taken directly from my journal.

- 11 March - Planes bombed submarine pens at Toulon, France. That night we started to load ten 500 # bombs on each plane. When we were almost finished orders were changed to load 20 of the large 100 # fragmentation bombs instead. We unloaded the 500's and loaded the frags.
- 12 March - Mission cancelled. We were ordered to unload the fragmentation bombs and load 500 pounders. Orders changed again - unloaded 500 # bombs and re-loaded the same frag bombs.
- 13 March - Planes grounded by weather. We unloaded the fragmentation bombs and loaded six 1000 pound bombs per plane. We had to wait for Ordnance, did not get started till 0200 and did not finish until 0430.

- 14 March - Planes grounded by heavy rain.
- 15 March - Planes supposed to bomb city of Cassino on troop support mission but most could not find target through clouds and returned with bombs. We removed the 1000 # bombs and loaded 12 500 # bombs per plane, finishing at midnight.
- 16 March - Planes grounded by weather. We unloaded the 500 # bombs and loaded double (40) 100 # incendiary bombs per plane. We worked all night and finished at 0500 in the morning.
- 17 March - Planes bombed target in Vienna. We did not receive loading orders until midnight, then it was double-clusters (40) of fragmentation bombs. We worked all night.
- 18 March - Planes bombed troop concentrations in northern Italy. We loaded ten 500 # bombs per plane that night.
- 19 March - Planes bombed Klagenfurt, Austria. We loaded 12 500 pound bombs per plane.
- 20 March - Planes grounded by weather. We unloaded the 500 pounders and loaded double-clusters of frags.
- 21 March - Mission cancelled by weather. Unloaded the frags in the morning. Planes went on a practice flight. "Ice Cold Katie", # 751, cracked up on landing and was badly damaged. We loaded 12 500 # bombs that night.
- 22 March - Planes left on a mission to Austria but target covered with clouds and all returned with full bomb load.
- 23 March - Planes grounded by weather. A 724th plane, "Wolf Wagon" blew up while taking off on a practice mission and crashed. No survivors.
- 24 March - Planes bombed ball bearing factory at Steyr, Austria.
- 25 March - Planes grounded by weather. We loaded double (40) 100 # incendiaries that night.

As can be seen from the above, the weather in March was atrocious. Our planes flew only ten missions that entire month, largely because of the poor weather. As I try to think back to those days at San Pancrazio I can think only of mud and long, backbreaking nights. For some reason I have no clear memory of our tent area, the line area or the field itself. That one-month period is almost a blank in my memory, as though the awful weather and primitive living conditions caused my mind to blank it all out. Since I had no film for most of that time, I don't even have any photos to jog my memory. By contrast, however, two or three events of that period do stand out in sharp relief over these forty years.

It was common knowledge that there was a large Italian/German bomb and ammunition dump on a small hill near our field. On Sunday, 19 March a group of several of us from the Armament Section decided to go and see what was there while the planes were on their mission. We took a weapons carrier and drove up a dirt road to the dump. The first thing we saw was a very large aerial bomb of at least 1000 to 1500 kilos. From its general design we decided it was Italian, rather than German. We looked it over very carefully to verify that the fuzes had been removed, then when we were quite sure it was safe several guys sat on the thing and the rest stood behind while I took their picture. There was almost every sort of ordnance in that dump that one could imagine. We could see several sizes of bombs, a huge pile of artillery shells and scattered all about were a variety of anti-tank and anti-personnel mines. One of our fellows started to walk into the dump but the rest of us told him to get the hell out, which he did.

Just two days later I was sickened to learn that two of the gunners from my plane, Big Mogul, Sergeants Hall and Whitney, had gone to the same dump and had both been killed by an anti-personnel mine. No one else was present and no one knew what had happened, though there was speculation that one of them may have fired his pistol into the mess. If so, it was an incredibly stupid thing to do, as the whole dump might have gone up. The mine that killed them was a German "Bouncing Betty" anti-personnel mine, sometimes also called a "Butterfly" mine. When triggered they jumped up and exploded shrapnel at waist height. One man was dead and the other dying when they were discovered. Both were buried at the U.S. Military Cemetery in Bari. They were friends and I was sick about it. I wondered if I had mentioned the big bomb to them and if so whether that had led them to visit the dump. I still wonder when I think of it. After their deaths the Air Force declared the area off limits, but it was too late for them. There must have been hundreds of abandoned bomb and munitions dumps scattered all over Europe after the war. Whatever became of them? How many children may have died playing in such places?

On 30 March we bombed the marshalling yards at Sofia. When the planes returned "Lonesome Polecat", No. 114, fired a red flare and, as on 8 February, we could see a red discoloration all over the nose. This time no one speculated about hydraulic fluid - we knew it was blood. The nose gunner had been hit in the head by a cannon shell from an ME-109, and it was every bit as bad as what happened to "Three Feathers". Fortunately, "Polecat" was assigned to another Flight so I was not involved in the clean-up this time.

I had my own problem. During the mission one of Jack Garrison's tail guns had jammed on "Big Mogul". We were grounded the next day and I spent the entire day working on the gun with Jack. We changed almost every part that had anything to do with cartridge feed, but still the gun would jam when it was charged. Finally, we removed the entire gun and replaced it with a new one. Unbelievably, the new gun also jammed! It was already late at night, so I had no choice but to red-line the plane, something I had never had to do before.

We were still grounded on 1 April and I spent the day working on the gun and related hardware. Our top Non-com, M/Sgt. Jones spent several

hours helping me but even he gave up on it. Everyone was just plain stumped. The next morning, out of desperation, I removed every bit of the ammunition from the tail turret and had Ordnance bring me some new belts. When I had it loaded and fed it into the gun it worked beautifully! The Ordnance guys then checked the old ammo and found that a section of the belt which was from the "defective" gun had been improperly belted. Either the belting machine was out of adjustment or someone had not operated it correctly, as the rounds had simply not been fully inserted into the links. We were all dumbfounded!

"Big Mogul" was thus ready to go on a mission to Budapest on April third, though she missed one to Steyr the previous day. When she returned from Budapest one engine was badly shot up and one tire flattened. Lt. Miller brought her in beautifully on three engines and the flat, but she was out of commission for several days for an engine change.

Around the first of April we were advised to start packing our gear and equipment for early transfer to our new field near Foggia. We all hoped it wasn't an Air Force April Fool's joke!.

On 5 April we bombed the Astra Oil Refinery and marshalling yards at Ploesti, Rumania. For this mission the 451st received its second Distinguished Unit Citation (Oak Leaf Cluster). Thirty-four planes took off, but six returned because of mechanical trouble. On the way to and over the target they were attacked by over 100 ME-109's and FW-190's, as well as by heavy flak batteries. The Group claimed 20 fighters shot down and 12 more probably destroyed. We lost five B-24's one of which exploded over the target. All planes lost were from the 724th and 727th Squadrons.

We had a stand-down the following day and since the weather had cleared a bit several of us went to visit an Italian family at a nearby farm. The farmer's wife had been doing our laundry for us so we took along some candy, cigarettes, soap and a few other things we swiped from the mess tent as gifts. In return the old man broke out several bottles of typical "Dago-red" wine and we had a very pleasant afternoon. I took a number of photographs while there.

Our Armament Section was supposed to leave by plane on 7 April for our new field. We took our tents down and packed all of our bags and waited, and waited, and waited for orders. Nothing happened. We ended up having to sleep in the open on the ground that night, but fortunately it was a clear night, though we were covered with dew by morning. We did leave the next morning by truck convoy and arrived at our new base at 1630 after a long, hard and dusty ride. We managed to get our tents up that night, but not our bunk beds.

Our new field was located near the small town of Castelluccio de Sauri about 25 Km. south of Foggia and west of Cerignola. It was constructed by the Corps of Engineers on a high plateau, overlooking a broad valley. The 5000 foot runway was covered with steel matting and had a cleared crash strip on either side. It was a beautiful sight to behold after our experiences at Gioia and San Pancrazio! Surrounding the runway were taxiways leading to dispersed hardstands or revetments which

were also covered with steel matting. One end of the runway simply aimed out over the valley, while near the other end was a large building which had apparently once been the landowner's home. This was the only building of any sort on the field and was immediately claimed by Col. Eaton for Group Headquarters. Specific areas were designated for each Squadron. The runway ran roughly northwest by southeast and our Squadron was located near the northwest end. The 725th area was just east of us while the 724th was at the other end of the runway, near Group H.Q. The 727th Squadron was located on the other side of the runway, near the center. Finally, our 60th Air Service Squadron was located on the opposite side of the end of the runway from us. There was a small stream flowing in the valley around our side of the plateau. The very next day several of us went down and jumped in the ice-cold water for our second bath since leaving the states.

Within a few days we had our tents, stoves and bunks all fixed up and were really comfortable, since it was fairly dry at our high location. We also got our line armament tents all set up, and equipment pretty well organized. Because we were now well within range of Luftwaffe fighter airstrips in central Italy we dug slit trenches around each tent in case the Krauts came to call. Our first mission from Castelluccio was on 12 April against marshalling yards at Zagreb. We flew twelve missions that month, mostly against marshalling yards and airdromes in northern Italy, Yugoslavia, Rumania and Hungary. We also hit the submarine pens at Toulon again on the 29th.

The weather continued cold and towards the end of April we had heavy rains which flooded some of our tents. There were many former Italian soldiers in the area and the Air Force hired some of them to help our cooks (no more K.P. for us!) and to construct buildings from local stone. They were good masons and by early summer they had erected a mess/club building for the officers and had put up several permanent buildings as work shops on the line. We got an armament building and a nice extension for our bombsight maintenance shop. Later, after the officers' club was built, a similar one was constructed for the enlisted men, but we had to wait a while.

One of the roughest nights we had came on 22/23 April. Our planes had bombed Bucharest marshalling yards on the 22nd and at midnight, in the middle of a red alert, when we had almost finished re-loading with 500 pound bombs, we received a change of orders to load double clusters of frags instead. After dropping the 500's, we waited until 0600 for our Ordnance people to bring up the fragmentation bombs. Takeoff was scheduled for 1000 and we just barely made it! I was still connecting arming wires in the open bomb bay while Lt. Miller warmed up his engines and made his pre-flight checks.

After we got established at Castelluccio, I began to go up with Miller on occasional practice flights to run power turret and gun tests. The gunners were usually happy to let me do that, as they could skip the flights and thus not tempt fate once too often. I enjoyed flying and was really fascinated by the rugged mountain ranges over which Allied and German troops were waging such bitter struggles.

May 1944 was a busy month, with our Group flying 20 combat missions. The month opened with an attack on targets in the Budapest area. That night we had an anniversary show at Group H.Q. to celebrate the formation of the 451st in May of '43. On the 3rd we received a new G model B-24, #250, produced by North American, which was basically the same as the H models made by Consolidated, Ford and Douglas. There was one difference - this was one of the first planes we received in plain aluminum finish, as contrasted with the camouflage paint on all of our original planes. This plane was assigned to Lt. Miller so I had a new plane to work on for the next couple days. He later named her "Goosey Lucy" for his wife. On the 5th I flew on a test flight to check out all the turrets and guns. Lucy flew her first combat mission on the 7th and Miller was lead pilot for the entire Group on a mission to the marshalling yards at Bucharest.

On 19 May during takeoff for a mission, the elevator cable on Lucy somehow came off its pulley. Miller was more than half way down the runway with a full bomb load when he realized he had no pitch control. Had he continued the takeoff he would almost surely have crashed, but it was nearly too late to abort. Nevertheless, he hit his brakes hard and screeched towards the end of the runway with blue smoke coming from the tires. At the last instant he executed a ground loop and finally came to a stop on the crash strip right at the end of the runway. One tire blew in the process, but the plane was otherwise undamaged. I think it was the finest example of pilot control I ever saw. The crew all jumped out of the plane completely shaken.

Early in April, as the weather turned milder, we began to modify our pyramidal tents by extending three of the side panels outwards and adding wood support walls. This greatly increased our floor area and made the tents more comfortable for the coming hot weather. Every tent was a bit different, with each group of men incorporating their own ideas for design and decor. Some tents even had skylights made from discarded plexiglas astro-domes from wrecked aircraft. This sort of tent modification was largely confined to the tents of the enlisted men. The officers, who lived in a separate tent area across the road from us, seldom did anything special with their tents. Since there were only four officers to a tent, contrasted with eight enlisted men to the same size tent, they were far less crowded and hence not inclined to make such modifications.

We had a stand down on the 11th and I took a pass to Cerignola. That evening I pulled guard duty. We had armed guards on the planes every night against the possibility of sabotage. By this time we were having movies at Group H.Q. almost every night so those who weren't working on the line or on guard duty usually piled into a weapons carrier and drove over for the movie after chow. It gave us something to do on free evenings, even if some of the films weren't all that good.

We had a Wing inspection on 16 May but I managed to avoid it as I was replacing a damaged gun barrel jacket on the ball turret of my plane. I had another pass on the 18th and went to Cerignola and Foggia to take photos and visit the service club. When I got back to the base that night I learned we had orders to load 2000 pound bombs, which meant that we first had to mount in each bomb bay the special bomb

racks that held those very large bombs. The racks never fit very well and there were instances when we actually had to use the winches to pull the sides of the bomb bay in enough to get the mounting bolts in place. We worked all night loading those bombs and then the mission the next day, to a viaduct in northern Italy, was aborted because of weather. A day later we had to unload all the 2000 pounders and remove the special racks from each plane.

The oil refineries at Ploesti continued to get our attention - we bombed them three times in May, which was indicative of the remarkable ability of the Germans to repair bomb damage in a surprisingly short time.

By this time I was receiving one or two films in every package I received from home and my parents were also sending me packages of hypo, tubes of MQ developer and photo printing paper. It was my intent to develop and print my films so that I could send pictures home. For this work I had arranged to use an almost ideal facility. As part of its basic maintenance equipment, each squadron had a bombsight maintenance shop. This was a small building, the upper half of which was designed to fit into the lower half for shipment. When set up it had good head room and plenty of shelf space. The building, which we called the bombsight shack, had its own power generator and lighting system, as well as a temperature control system with filtered air supply. I had become good friends with the three bombsight maintenance men and sometimes helped them calibrate sights when I had free time. They agreed to let me use the building to develop and print films on a non-interference basis with their needs, which meant that I used it mostly during the night.

I had no equipment for this work at all. An ordinary 40 watt light bulb painted red served for my printing safelight and for processing trays I started off using pans borrowed from the squadron kitchen. Later on I made up some nice trays using plexiglas. For printing I first used simply a piece of glass over the film and paper, with an overhead bulb for a printing light. Later in the year I fabricated a fairly decent contact printer using a discarded ammunition box.

The biggest problem was how to wash the film and prints, since, of course, there was no running water available. At first I carried everything down to the creek to do the washing, but the water was simply not clean enough. Finally, I just used the multiple soaking bath method with drinking water from one of our Lister bags. It was a slow, tedious process, using perhaps twenty or thirty changes of water. I am truly surprised that such a crude process actually worked fairly well. I still have all of those negatives I exposed overseas and after forty years they still show no sign of fading or staining, though some are scratched and have a few dirt particles imbedded in the emulsion. Even most of the prints which I sent home to my parents are in good condition, with only minor fading.

After the word got around as to what I was doing several other fellows asked me to process their films for them, which I did as long as I had enough supplies. When I ran short of paper I was usually able to con the Group photo lab boys out of a few sheets. Consequently, when I

had a free evening I usually spent it developing and printing in the bombsight shack. And often after the bombs were loaded in the evening I would work the rest of the night printing and then walk to the line before breakfast to see the planes off.

Around the middle of May the Group began to receive a few B-24's equipped with target-identifying radar installations. We called these planes "Mickey Mouse" aircraft because of all the strange equipment we didn't understand. The name "Mickey" stuck and everyone called them that till the end of hostilities. These planes were painted a very dark color, almost black, and though they were attached to our Group they normally didn't fly with the Group. Instead they usually went on solo missions, often leaving at dusk and not returning until first light. These missions were highly classified and we never knew where they went or how successful they had been. They were parked in special locations and maintained under constant armed guard. Specially trained technicians were brought in to maintain the radar equipment, but the Squadron people did the regular airframe and engine work. We also loaded the bombs and maintained the armament on the Mickeys.

On my birthday, 4 June, I got a pass and went to Foggia and also to Lucera, where I visited an old Roman amphitheater. That was also the day when American troops first entered Rome, which Kesselring had declared an open city. Two days later Allied troops invaded Normandy and we began to think we might see the light at the end of the tunnel.

It was not always easy to know what was really going on in the war for those of us who were there. The Army published a monthly newsprint magazine called "Yank" for the troops overseas but it did not contain current news. There was also the newspaper, "Stars and Stripes" which was published for the troops in Italy and we had our own Group newsletter called "Ad-Libs". The best current news coverage was from the Armed Forces Radio station in Naples or from the BBC. After we finished loading bombs I would often turn on the plane's radio for a while in the hope of getting a late news broadcast from the BBC. I also often tuned in Berlin to listen to Axis Sally. She had an incredibly sexy voice and her program included recordings of the latest songs from the U.S., interspersed with a blatant propaganda line. I have always wondered how she acquired all those up-to-the-minute records. Her favorite line was to "feel sorry" for the G.I.'s fighting overseas while their wives and sweethearts were undoubtedly sleeping with rich Jewish war-profiteers and 4-F's at home. Having neither wife nor sweetheart, this didn't bother me a bit and I rather enjoyed her program, especially the music. When I saw a photo of Mildred Gillers after the War, I was rather disappointed, as she was not the gorgeous creature of my mind's eye.

As the winter of '44 had been cold, wet and miserable, the summer was quite the opposite, very hot and often windy and dusty. The planes would churn up clouds of dust while they warmed up engines or taxied for takeoff. We were very thankful for the small creek where we could cool off and wash most of the grime and dust from our bodies. There were several teen-aged boys who came to our camp from Castelluccio and each tended to "adopt" one or two tent-groups. Our boy, Pasquale, did